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Kick Over the Statues! Are the Icons of Photography Still Relevant?

Grant Scott

When talking to students about photography I often use the metaphor of music to question their level of engagement with the subject they are studying. I ask whether they would consider it reasonable to be studying music and never to have heard of Bach, Beethoven, The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, Nirvana, David Bowie, The Sex Pistols, The Clash, Madonna, Michael Jackson, Kanye West, Beck, Beyoncé, etc., etc. Of course, that list could go on forever and the students are always keen to add names of people I have not mentioned but the answer is always the same, a resounding no! I follow this question by asking how many photographers work and names they know and can talk to me about. The response to this question is always more muted and often little more than an embarrassed silence. My point has been made and an awkward realisation falls upon the room. They have not discovered the benefit of having heroes.

I grew up in an age of heroes – the 1960's, 70's and 80's – popular cultural heroes, writers, singers, actors, broadcasters, artists, designers, thinkers who challenged my perceptions and offered new places to go creatively and intellectually. I learnt photography by looking at the work of the photographers whom I admired. Irving Penn for his studio portrait/still-life classicism, Eugene Smith for his empathy and narrative constructions, William Klein for his graphic immediacy, Diane Arbus for her unsettling subject matter, David Bailey and Richard Avedon for their sense of unimpeachable confidence, Don McCullin for his unflinching eye, Robert Frank for his spontaneity, Ernst Haas for his sense of experimentation, Walker Evans for everything! all were and remain heroes to me. They informed my eye as cultural heroes such as Bob Dylan, Robert Hughes, John Berger and Ernest Hemmingway fed my mind and in so doing informed my photography. They are the building blocks for the way I see and create photographs and perhaps most importantly what, who and where I choose to make my photographs.

The history of photography is essential to its present and future but so are heroes to a photographer's creative make-up. I understand that the words 'hero' and 'icon' can often be misunderstood in this context. I do not use them as terms of deification, I am not placing them on pedestals but I do recognise their importance culturally in both a personal and wider context. Of course, each generation should have its own heroes but in so doing we should not forget those icons of the past that laid the path for the photographers of today.

We should also not forget that the work we now see in blockbuster museum exhibitions and weighty coffee table monographs was at one time the work that was shown in small gallery shows, magazines and sometimes not at all! Icons and heroes rarely appear fully formed, they earn their positions of respect through hard work and dedication. So, it would be reasonable to assume that we can learn not only from their work but also from their journeys. Those that kick over the statues are often the same people placed on a pedestal in future years as the importance of their actions are recognised by subsequent generations inspired by their thoughts and actions.

To deny photography's history and those who helped create it is to deny the importance of the work they created both historically and aesthetically. It is also to deny the learning that is available from that looking at and understanding that work. To return to the metaphor of studying music would it be reasonable to expect someone to write a song or a series of songs without ever having listened to at least one? Therefore, would it not be reasonable to expect that the more you listened to different forms of song the better your understanding would be of how to write one?

So why is it that so many young photographers are unaware of the history of their medium? Some blame social media and in the lack of accurate image accreditation they may have a small point. Images are too often seen today out of context of a photographer's wider body of work and therefore images are remembered but who created them is not and neither is when, how and why that image was created. Others blame poor teaching of the history of photography where theory based dogma too often kills the excitement that students should have in studying the past as having a relevance to their practice. Personally, I think that both reasons have an impact to a greater or lesser extent on the apparent apathy towards the importance of engaging with the icons of photography. However, I believe that there is a more relevant issue that is causing this situation and I think that it is something that those who teach photography need to address.

It is that of personality, the personality of the photographer. We need our photographic heroes and icons and we should not feel embarrassed to see them as we did heroes and icons from any other area of creative expression. We should be interested in their lives, their motivations and their personal histories and we should share this interest – or in my case passion – with the students we teach. We need to make them real to our students, we need to make them as important as the images they create. If we want people to be interested in photographers and photography we need to make them interesting.

We need to understand their strengths and their frailties, their motivations and their outcomes. We don't need to put them on pedestals and treat them as relics of the past to be revered, we need to make them relevant to today and to anyone starting their photographic studies